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THE HOLY SPIRIT IN FRANCIS LIBERMANN

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By FX Malinowski, C.S.Sp.

INTRODUCTION¹

Venerable Francis Libermann lived in the nineteenth century when the missionary activity of the Church was expanding dramatically. Missionaries could expect enormous apostolic work. Their spiritual life would never be the same. What ancient theologians grappled with, viz., the relation between the active life and contemplation, (and answered like S. Thomas Aquinas in his "contemplata aliis tradita") had now to be resolved anew and on an even more practical level.

Libermann's genius² anticipated the conviction emerging in the Church today that the Spirit breathes not just in chapels and churches, but in the streets, in human beings. Daily living becomes the extended chapel, in which prayer and daily life are intimately joined. His doctrine on the Holy Spirit as the architect and builder of the spiritual life is simple: in prayer and apostolic life we rely on the Holy Spirit in everything, always. The Spirit does the rest.

This paper presents Libermann's teaching in two parts:

PART I LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

Faith in the mystery of the Holy Spirit in us determines the intensity of our response to his action.³

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this paper when referring to Libermann's writings: LS (Lettres spirituels, 4 vols.); ND (Notes et Documents, 13 vols., with Appendices to vol. 9 and vol. 13 and Complément Volume); CJ (Commentaire de Saint Jean, 2nd ed.); ES (Ecrits spirituels); ESS (Ecrits spirituels Supplément); LSN newly published Letters of Libermann.

² Pierre Blanchard in his magisterial study, Le Vénérable Libermann (Paris: Desclée et Brouwer, 1960), calls Libermann "...this man of God who is a genius, the genius of spirituality, the genius of missionary expansion" (vol 1, p.9). Spiritans owe immense gratitude to P. Blanchard for showing them the depth and significance of Father Libermann's life and spiritual writings. Paul Coulon, in Libermann: 1802-1852: Une Pensée et une Mystique missionnaires, 1988, p. 133, considers Blanchard's work as "the most important work done up to this time on Father Libermann". He calls it a remarkable work and an indispensable synthesis towards the deepening of knowledge about Libermann.

³ In LS 2.388-89 (1839, to M. Poupart, a seminary director; ND 1.459) Libermann describes how he deals with people coming to him for spiritual direction. He first arouses in them an intense desire for holiness which gives him access to the interior dispositions of the person: "... I begin by giving him a strong idea of christian perfection so that he become impressed and as it were elevated. Seeing its loftiness and beauty, he becomes enamored by it and craves to reach such a beautiful and admirable state." He writes to a seminarian: "Don't be satisfied with being an ordinary seminarian, but aim at becoming a saint, even a great saint. There is nothing wrong with fostering the strongest and loftiest desires and expectations in this matter; on the contrary, if you want to be a true priest in the future, you must now be filled with desires" (ND 1.418, Oct 1838, to M. Jolivel).

PART II LED BY THE SPIRIT

The Indwelling Spirit integrates prayer and apostolic activity into one "practical" experience which Libermann calls "practical union".

Paul's celebrated dictum "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25) provides the inspiration and framework for Libermann's teaching.

PART ONE

LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

A THE SPIRIT OF HOLINESS

Libermann was familiar with the prayer "O Jesu Vivens in Maria" from his early years in Paris when preparing for the priesthood in an environment steeped in French School traditions. In explaining it⁴ he stressed the invocation "in Spiritu sanctitatis tuae" ("in the Spirit of your holiness"),⁵ i.e., in the Spirit that caused Jesus to be completely holy, completely devoted to his Father. The Spirit as the cause of HOLINESS recalls the primordial meaning of holiness which defines God (Is 6:3: "Holy. holy. holy is the Lord") and purges away what offends God (Matt 3:11: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire"). The invocation affirms that the Spirit's action is ordained to bring about adherence to God and separation from all creature preference, both essential to holiness.

"It seems to me that in this life all the activity of the Holy Spirit has our holiness as its goal; and consequently, he is able to be in us a Spirit of holiness, which is about the same thing as a Spirit of

⁴ Libermann knows the prayer has a history going back to Charles de Condren (1588-1641). His piety towards the Virgin Mary rises to exaltation as he recalls that the prayer was indeed intended to sing the praises of what the Incarnation did to Mary and what she can do for us. See Irénée Noye, "Recherche et orientations spirituelles sur la prière: O Jesu vivens in Maria," in Compagnies de Saint Sulpice. Bulletin du Comité des Etudes, no. 7, Octobre 1954 and no. 8, Janvier-mars 1955, for a presentation of the origins, development and explanations of the prayer. He deems Libermann's explanation one of the more significant ones. The article demonstrates that the version of the prayer Libermann knew and commented on (LS 2.506-22, Apr 1841, to Eugène Dupont; ND 2.456-67) was a revision of de Condren's original which lacked "in Mary" (as in "Jesu vivens in Maria") which was added later by J.J. Olier (1608-1641).

⁵ To see how much French School influence is in this prayer and in Libermann's understanding compare Olier's explanation: "...in sanctitate spiritus: live in me in the holiness of your Spirit, which means that the Holy Spirit separate us from every creature and apply us to God alone, which is properly the meaning of the word holiness" (see Noye, op. cit., no. 7, p. 13).

separation from every creature in order to be united to God, plunged into the bosom of God, and having no other life than his."⁶

Libermann calls the Spirit the author (originator, creator, source) and consummator (completer, finisher, accomplisher) of holiness.⁷ In the process of holiness, the Spirit is "terrible" in the sense he intends moral purification which cannot be done without pain. "...God reserves very trying troubles for those he wants to benefit substantially and solidly..."⁸ "Pains and crosses are the lot of those God wishes to sanctify." This is essential for the establishment of God's reign in us.

"Be holy because our heavenly Father is holy. Always rejoice before your divine Master, for his Spirit of holiness is in you. How terrible is this Spirit of holiness! How he wants us pure and holy in order to be agreeable to the divine Spirit of Jesus' holiness and in order to keep hold of him in the plenitude of our being!"¹⁰

"The means Jesus uses to establish us in his life and holiness are terrible. You can imagine what force is necessary to uproot us effectively from ourselves and as it were despite ourselves....The shock is terrible and the jolt frightening. But this flesh succumbs, it is beaten down and the Spirit of Jesus gradually takes control of us to the detriment and on the ruins of every hostile power."¹¹

⁶ LS 1.279, Aug 1837, to Paul Carron, Seminarian; ND 1.483. Libermann elaborates: "Here it isn't asked how he [Jesus] lives in us with his Holy Spirit, but with his Spirit of holiness, which refers to that separation from every creature, that horror and alienation from everything that would estrange him from his Father, that life totally absorbed in his Father, that life by which the holiness of his Father was his. We ask...that by this Spirit of holiness he purify us of all that is foreign to God, that he separate us from all creatures, that he retract all our affections from every created object and from ourselves, in order to put them with his own, all in his heavenly Father, and that he establish in us his own life of holiness" (LS 2.516, Apr 1841, to E. Dupont; ND 2.463).

⁷ See ND 10.568: Règlements 1849; LS 1.52, 1834, etc. He is frequently "trinitarian" in his description of divine activity in human beings, referring also to Jesus and the Word as author and consummator of all holiness: LS 1.60 (Word), LS 3.339 (Jesus), ES 407 (Jesus).

⁸ LS 4.286, Mar 1846, to P. Lossadat; ND 8.71.

⁹ LS 4.133, Sept 1844, to Fr. Lossadat; ND 6.341.

¹⁰ LS 2.101, Oct 1838, to Paul Carron; ND 1.511.

¹¹ LS 2.396-97, 1839, to an Eudiste Seminarian; ND 1.453.

No doubt Libermann's Jewish upbringing¹² left in him deep convictions of how awesome the reality of God is, and how God's being can only be holiness, i.e., what is proper to God alone. Man unless invited and drawn cannot approach this Holy Being, and when he does, it's only because he has been made ready through painful experience. Thus Libermann can state, "How terrible is this Spirit of Holiness!"¹³

"...no person is ever sanctified without work, without pains and afflictions...."¹⁴

"Every one knows that death implies excruciating pain. The same thing applies to dying spiritually to our nature. It is preceded by terrible agonies, sometimes lasting a long time, accompanied by the most tormenting symptoms."¹⁵

However, there is a positive side to painful moral purification. The Spirit dwells within the believer, not as an antagonist, but as an intimate, whose presence radiates sweetness and love. "All that trickles down from the divine Spirit is sweet [doux], gracious [suave], unassuming and humble."¹⁶

¹² The Spiritan scholar Roger Le Déaut's short paper, "Judaism and Spiritan Spirituality," is an excellent, though terse, presentation. He remarks, "All that we can learn about Libermann's Jewish heritage will help us reconstruct his personality" (*Spiritan Papers*, no. 20, p. 17 [Dec 1986]). He also remarks, "In the Congregation, we like to recall the Jewish origins of Libermann" (p. 16). Blanchard, *ibid.*, underlines this in referring to Libermann as "an authentic representative of the people of Israel" (1.24), as "an authentic child of Israel" (1.27), "whose face was of a very remarkable Israelite type" (1.29). See Michael Cahill, C.S.Sp., *Libermann's Commentary on John: an Investigation of the Rabbinical and French School Influences*, Doctoral Dissertation presented to the Institut Catholique de Paris, 1985, for a careful and minute study of possible Jewish influences. He would claim that, as regards the Commentary on John, his Jewish education had little impact on his interpretation of John. The thrust of Spiritan scholarship, even its most recent, strongly dissents from a position like Cahill's. However, such scholarship does not seem to have given Cahill's work satisfactory consideration. Cahill (pp. 279-80) argues from profuse detail for little evidence of Jewish influence claimed by Lécuyer, Sigrist and others. He concludes that such insistence is "a gross exaggeration" (p. 280) and not confirmed by Libermann's commentary on John.

¹³ See LS 2.465, Jul 1840, to M. Clair, Seminarian; ND 2.207-08. It seems correct to begin this paper with Libermann's awareness of the connection between God's holiness and moral purity. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 6 saw, perhaps for the first time in salvation history, the necessity of moral purification when confronted with Yahweh's holiness and was obliged by the Seraphim with burning coals that morally purified him. Fire as associated with moral purification and the Spirit is found in the Baptist's preaching (Matt 3:11; Lk 3:17; compare with Lk 12:49: "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled").

¹⁴ LS 2.228, Easter Thursday, 1839, to A. de Conny; ND 1.405.

¹⁵ ND 4.432, Nov 1843, to Mlle Guilleme.

¹⁶ LS 2.468, Feast of St. Dominic, 1840, to M. Luquet; ND 2.124.

B THE INDWELLING SPIRIT

The source of Libermann's spirituality lay in the mystery of the Spirit's indwelling of the baptized Christian who was made for holiness, the holiness that is the Spirit's being, "that he [the Spirit] may establish in us his own life of holiness."¹⁷ He describes the Spirit's indwelling in various ways, closely synonymous¹⁸:

(1) The Spirit simply **IS** in us. "...give tranquil and interior attention to the grace and the Holy Spirit who **IS** in you."¹⁹ He states this frequently in his writings.

(2) The Spirit **resides** in us, makes his home within us, which evokes intimacy and familiarity. "Remain tranquil and peaceful near the Holy Spirit...who resides in you and wants to be there in everything."²⁰

(3) The Spirit **dwells** in us as in his sanctuary. "The same Holy Spirit who did such great things in them [the great saints] is in you, making his sanctuary there to produce the same effects in you."²¹ "Sanctuary" points to the holiness of the place of his indwelling because he himself is holiness.

(4) The Spirit can be found in the **deepest recesses** of our being, not in my brain, my physical heart, my will, my hands, my feet, etc., but beyond body, beyond intellect, beyond will. That beyond is "me", what individualizes me, what personalizes me. Libermann calls it "au fond", the most intimate part of me, the interior of my being, not just my interior, my inner world, but the interior of my soul, the "still center" of my whole being, body and soul. the ultimate place of my soul, my self. This is where the Spirit and sweetness [douceur] reside, because there precisely is where the love of Jesus is found, radiating out into my soul and body. It is not a place that can be reached by intellect or imagination but a place where we receive Jesus' sanctifying self-communication which is the work of the Spirit, where precisely the Spirit is the sanctifying principle. "Pay particular

¹⁷ LS 2.516, Apr 1841, to E. Dupont; ND 2.463.

¹⁸ Note the testimony of the NT: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God" (1 Cor 6:19). "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit" (1 J 4:13).

¹⁹ LS 1.75, Jan 1835, to M. Leray, Seminarian; ND 1.200.

²⁰ ND 1.416, Jan 1838, to M.R.V.

²¹ LS 1.128, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne, Seminarian; ND 1.230.

attention to the Holy Spirit dwelling personally in the core ["au fond"] of your being..."²² "[The Spirit] who resides in the center ["le centre"] of your soul".²³

(5) The Spirit reposes in our soul: "Remind yourself that the Holy Spirit reposes in your being....",²⁴ which describes the Spirit's peaceful contentment to be there, recalling Libermann's teaching of sweetness [douceur] and peace as the essential environment for the perfect working of the Spirit in us. Libermann obviously alludes to the Last Supper scene of the Beloved Disciple resting on Jesus' breast. "Jesus dwells in the deep interior of our soul and, being master of all our powers, keeps them resting in himself....Our soul, for its part, resting thus on its Well-Beloved, gives itself over to him completely..."²⁵ He recommends in another place: "Be at rest constantly on the bosom of Jesus and abandoned into the hands of his divine Spirit."²⁶

Such descriptions of the Spirit's presence in us reveal Libermann's preoccupation with the Spirit. Though these can be attributed to scriptural reference, it's not an exaggeration to think that he is speaking "ex abundantia cordis", to which his contemporaries bore witness. "[They]...venerated him [Libermann] as a saint...a man animated by the Spirit of God."²⁷ "I cannot doubt that this holy man [Libermann] was animated by the divine Spirit."²⁸

²² LS 1.222, Sept 1836, to his brother Samson, medical doctor, and Wife; ND 1.168.

²³ LS 1.386, Jan 1838, to M. Tisserant, Seminarian; ND 1.475. As in any divine action "ad extra" Libermann can attribute it variously: "...tranquil and effortless attention to God, who resides in the core ["le fond"] of our being" (LS 1.99, Aug 1835, to unknown Seminarian; ND 1.206). "...God reposes in the depth ["le fond"] of our being, he dwells in our innermost being ["l'intime"]...at the source of all our faculties, communicating to them a totally spiritual life and peace" (LS 1.297, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary Director; ND 1.394).

²⁴ LS 2.106, Oct 1838, to M. de Goy, Seminarian.

²⁵ LS 2.594, Dec 1841, to E. Dupont, Seminarian; ND 3.83. But we can also think of the Song of Songs as P. Blanchard does (vol. 1, p. 134). See LS 1.151, Jan 1836, to M. Mangot, Seminarian; LS 1.168, May 1836, to M. Mangot; ND 7.191, June 1845, to Miss Barbier (mostly handwritten by P. Lannurien).

²⁶ ND 2.129, June 1840, to an unknown and close friend; LS 2.425.

²⁷ ND 13 Appendix 20, from Marie-Madelaine-Victoire de Bonnault d'Houet, foundress of the Faithful Companions of Jesus.

²⁸ ND 2.425, from M. de Brandt. Libermann had deeply impressed many as marvelously gifted in holiness: "You are wrong to make fun of m. Libermann. He's a saint" (ND 1.112, by a Seminary Director to M. Bousset; "I kept these letters [from Libermann] as relics of a saint...." (ND 1.113, from Dom Salier); "Everybody held him up as a saint" (ND 1.127, from P. Delaplace). Pope Gregory XVI predicted after meeting him "Sara un santo" (ND 2.55, from M. Drach).

C THE SPIRIT'S PURPOSES

(1) Jesus, when addressed as good, promptly replies no one is good except God (Mk 10:17-18). The Old Testament affirms that God must be loved without reservation, exclusively. The Book of Revelation (4:8-11) portrays the heavenly beings proclaiming God's absolute claim over all creation and history. Libermann remained true to his Jewish roots, declaring a short time before he died that God is all, man is nothing. A. Gilbert, C.S.Sp., considers this statement of Libermann a summation of his life and teaching, bonding them together. In poetic elevation he concludes his book on Libermann: "Such is the definitive interior experience, such is the definitive message of Francis Libermann at the threshold of the eternal face to face: God is all."²⁹

Rooted in biblical convictions, Libermann taught that the Spirit's influence affects everything we think and do. The Spirit is to be our unique life, "the soul of our souls", an expression he liked.³⁰ It stresses the Spirit as the constitutive principle of supernatural life in us as well as the promoter and sustainer of that life.

"All you have to do is keep yourself docile and pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life, whom our Lord has placed in your soul to be your all. He must be the principle and unique source of all your affections, desires and movements of your soul; he must be the driving-power of your mind and the guide of your soul through the movements he implants there."³¹

There is a "totality" in Libermann's conception of the Spirit in us: his operations determine all of ours. His mastery is to become so "natural" that the movements of our being are in harmony with his sanctifying influence just as our bodies are in tune with our soul's faculties. "Let the Holy Spirit act in you as our body lets our soul act....The only difference is that our body is compelled to receive and follow the soul's impulses, while

²⁹ (*Le feu sur la terre* [Le Sarcment: Fayard, 1985], pp. 239-40). (See Cahill p. 278). We find similar statements, in exalted speech, in his St. Sulpice-Issy period: "God alone, God alone, and always God alone!" (LS 1.53, Jan 1836, to M. Mangot; ND 1.274). "God alone, nothing more, nothing less" (LS 1.160, Apr 1836, to M. Mangot; ND 1.272). "God alone, God alone, and nothing more" (LS 1.256, Jan 1837, to M. Liévin; ND 1.223). "God alone, dear friend, God alone and always God alone" (LS 1.457, Mar 1838, to Paul Carron [?]; ND 1.503). "God alone! God alone!" (LS 1.539, Jun 1838, to M. Cahier Seminary Director; ND 1.389).

³⁰ LS 1.442, Mar 1838, circular letter to Seminarians; ND 1.455. LS 1.459, Apr 1838, to M. Aubriot; ND 1.462. LS 3.14, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer; ND 3.102. He also described Jesus in the same way: LS 2.112, Oct 1839, M. Clair; ND 2.198. LS 3.267, Jul 1843, to Mlle Guillearme; ND 4.258.

³¹ LS 1.366-67, Dec 1837, a circular letter to Seminarians; ND 447. See LS 1.214-15, Oct 1836, to F. Liévin; ND 1.222.

our soul ought to willingly receive and follow the holy impulse of this divine soul of the Spirit of Jesus."³²

"Be holy, friend, because the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is holy, and because his Spirit who ought to live and act in you is holy. Enter fully into the designs of holiness that our great Master has over you....Abandon yourself fully to this Spirit of sovereign holiness, and not only will he live fully in you, but your life will no longer be yours, it will be that of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who will be all things in you."³³

Libermann wrote the above passage just after arriving at Rennes to take up the job of Novice Master for the Eudists. No doubt, he was full of excited anticipation, feeling, for the first time, perhaps, that he was no longer a servant kept around out of pity but was now "earning" his keep. The text sums up the kinds of spiritual themes found in his previous letters, themes suffused with the enthusiasm of the new convert, the insight of the novice who has just glimpsed the beckoning world of holiness.

(2) Libermann was exposed to the spiritual writings of Olier (1608-57), Jean Eudes (1601-80), who were influenced by Bérulle (1575-1629, whose works were unavailable to Libermann), and to the tradition they left behind in Saint Sulpice and Rennes. They pointed to the permanent significance of Jesus' life experiences which were the experiences of God's Son.³⁴ What Jesus experienced was meant to benefit others." "He establishes his life in us in all the states and mysteries he lived and lives now in the eternal bosom of the Father" (CJ at 6:57). The prayer Jesus Vivens in Maria, originating in the same tradition, contains that teaching: "veni et vive in mysteriis tuis," asking Jesus to let us share in his mysteries so that he may live in us in the Spirit of his holiness. It is the life of Jesus

³² ND 3.102, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer, deacon. Hence he could say, "The supernatural life becomes somehow natural" (ES 554).

³³ LS 1.301-02, Sept 1837, to Paul Carron, Seminarian; ND 1.484.

³⁴ Libermann reflects a berullian influence that came to him through Olier, Eudes and others: "It is vital to realize that the divine Incarnation of the Word in the holy humanity is not a transitory act of the divinity, nor a passing operation of the Holy Spirit, but will be henceforth an act which will last for all eternity" (CJ 648). Wm. Thompson, Bérulle and the French School: Selected Writings (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 37ss, reports Bérulle's influence on others. See B. Kelly, Life Began at Forty: the Second Conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp, pp. 28ss, concerning Bérulle's impact on Olier whose life and thought Libermann knew so well.

³⁵ Perhaps the earliest expression of this is in the confessional statement in 1 Cor 15:3: "...he died for our sins." John's Gospel accents heavily that whatever the believer receives is first the perfect possession of Jesus. We receive light, truth, life, resurrection, sonship, the Spirit, the bread of life, etc. because Jesus possessed them first.

Libermann wants to see reproduced in us through the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus,³⁶ he witnesses to Jesus, he leads to Jesus, he imparts the life of Jesus himself.

These mysteries are meant to be assimilated by the believer when he gives the Spirit opportunity and license. Then the Spirit establishes in him the life of Jesus with its sweetness [*douceur*] and loving dedication. The work of the Spirit in the mysteries of Jesus cannot be ignored and relegated to a piety of another age. The New Testament isn't saying anything different: see, e.g., Phil 1:8; 2:5; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:10-11; Col 1:24; 2:9; Eph 3:16-19, etc. Jesus in exhorting us to learn of him because he is meek [sweet?] and humble of heart (Mt 11:29) is not so much inculcating attitudes we should foster as **revealing who he is for others.**

“Our Lord has sent us his divine Spirit to be our whole life and to effect in us the perfections and holiness he worked in our Lord himself. Notice, friend, God’s goodness—his miracle of grace and love—in sending us such a great Teacher to reveal the marvels the Father endowed his Beloved Son with and to bring them about in our souls!”³⁷

(3) The Spirit by means of these mysteries molds us in Christ’s image. We become what we see and are near, what we keep in our hearts. “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).³⁸ “The Holy

³⁶ Scripture scholars make much out of the language used by the Bible to describe the Holy Spirit in order to capture the nuances of the action of the Spirit and his relation to Jesus and to the Father. Libermann, following in the French School tradition especially as represented by Olier, seems to do the same thing. For example, using “Spirit” or “Spirit of God” or “divine Spirit” (which are favorites of Libermann) would highlight God-being; the “Spirit of Jesus Christ” would highlight the mysteries of Jesus in which the Spirit played a fullness of role, but also would emphasize that the Spirit comes from Jesus and belongs to Jesus and brings all things to him. Statistically, “Spirit”, “Spirit of God”, “Divine Spirit” predominate in volume 2 of his letters and the Commentary on John, a period identified with or close to Libermann’s painful Rennes experience (1837-1839). It was a time when he had nothing else to rely on than the Holy Spirit. For Olier’s usage see Guy Tilliette, “Dans son Esprit de Sainteté,” in *Jean-Jacques Olier (1608-1657)*, Bulletin de Saint-Sulpice, no. 14 (Paris: 1988), pp. 36-37.

³⁷LS 2.407, 1839, to a Seminarian; ND 1.453 suggests 1837 as the date. “How beautiful and divine is the life of Jesus! It is a life of love, and the life of love is a sweet [*douce*] and powerful life which fills us with the holiness of Jesus” (LS 2.599, Dec 1841, to M. Douay, Seminarian; ND 3.87).

³⁸ See the attitude of Mary when confronted with the mysteries of Jesus: Luke 2:19, 52. The early Church’s interpretation of Mary’s inner life is surely meant to be a “canonical” attitude in the sense that the early Church proposes it as normative for us. “May Jesus’ Spirit be our whole occupation, movement and life, to unite us and make us one thing with himself in Mary, through Mary and with Mary” (LS 2.424, June 1840, to one of his most intimate friends, now unknown; ND 2.129). In underlining Mary’s keeping in her heart the mysteries of Jesus she witnessed, it is not out of line to quote David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 108: “Certain

Spirit would act in us according to the full force and to the full extent of grace, and our interior would be a perfect image of the interior of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁹

In this way the power of the Spirit is engaged. The Spirit, as Scripture asserts, is associated with **power**—in fact, rarely a text or context exists in the Bible in which Spirit and power are not associated. Felix Gils, C.S.Sp., in his paper on the Cana episode in John's Gospel, offers a useful resume of the biblical meaning of the Spirit as "dynamis" (=power) but does not do justice to its full connotation when he restricts it to mean "strength". The Spirit's "dynamis" not only "strengthens" the Christian to preach boldly, believe without fear, but also **changes dramatically** those on whom the Spirit pounces (see Judges, 1-2 Samuel, *passim*). The Spirit can be gently received, like oil pouring out (Titus 3:6), but also can be sensed as a "violent" agent (Acts 8:16, 39; 10:44; 11:15), as it were. "The Spirit of Jesus Christ is strong and powerful; once in a soul, he takes hold of it and dominates all its acts, thoughts and feelings."⁴⁰ "...being thus abandoned into the hands of his Holy Spirit, he takes hold of your soul and possesses it to such an extent that he becomes its whole life."⁴¹ However, by constricting his movements and blocking his illumination, we keep the Spirit, who ought to fly free like a dove, a caged prisoner anxiously waiting release.

"The Spirit would like to act, but you bind his arms and legs by your indecision and fears. Take a look at the love with which he pushes you, and you keep him from acting! Give him liberty, and you will see the great things he will work in you."⁴²

"...give yourself fully to Jesus and you will see the great marvels he will work in you."⁴³

expressions of the human spirit so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some kind of normative status." Mary's "keeping in her heart" what she witnessed is certainly "a compelling truth".

³⁹ LS 1.66, Sept 1834, to M. Leray, Seminarian; ND 1.199.

⁴⁰ ND 12.361, Sept 1850, to M. Libmann.

⁴¹ LS 1.368, Dec 1837, a circular letter to Seminarians.

⁴² LS 1.222, Sept 1836, to his brother Samson; ND 1.168-70.

⁴³ LS 2.182, Jan 1839, to M. Jolivel; ND 1.420. Libermann never hid his astonishment over what the Spirit did in human beings: "Our adorable Master operates great marvels in the midst of our mire and manure [=our faults and failures]" (LS 2.191, Feb '1839, to Paul Carron; ND 1.512. "A priest full of zeal for the very great glory of his Master will perform marvels, having reached this point in the love of God" (LS 2.230, Apr 1839, to M. de Conny; ND 1.405). "You are no longer earthly men, but angels of God in whom Jesus works the marvels of his divine love" (LS 2.282, Oct 1839, to two Jewish converts; ND 1.473). In 1839, when he was in so much pain, he could speak frequently of "marvel"!

How do we "set free" this holy and powerful Spirit? Libermann doesn't say that we "use" the Spirit, that we "move" him, rather we let him be the Spirit of holiness, "delivering ourselves tied feet and hands to his [Jesus] divine Spirit",⁴⁴ for only he has the power to create that divine reflection shining on Jesus' face (2 Cor 3:17-18; 4:6)—in a word, which Libermann likes to repeat, we cannot make the supernatural, which holiness is. "It is metaphysically impossible for someone to practise supernatural virtue by the efforts of nature. One could feign them hypocritically, but, seriously, that's hardly possible."⁴⁵ That's why he was wary of spiritual writers. How can they know the interior soul and its divinely-fixed destiny?⁴⁶ "God gives to each one interior grace by which one ought to unite oneself to God. This grace God gives diversely according to the character, spirit, natural manner of being of each one. Hence, each one has his way, his direction for going to God...,"⁴⁷ Logically only the Spirit knows and only the Spirit has the power to accomplish this. Libermann compares the new creation in the Spirit with the old creation: God created the first out of nothing; and he does the same for the new and last creation; and that is what he prefers to do:

"When God wanted to create the universe, he worked with nothing; and look at the beautiful things he made! Likewise, if he wants to work in us in order to operate things infinitely superior to all the natural beauties that have come from his hands, he doesn't need us to be unduly concerned to help him"⁴⁸

⁴⁴ LS 2.44, Jul 1838, circulated letter to Seminarians; ND 1.448.

⁴⁵ ND 8.204, Aug 1846, to J. Schwindenhammer.

⁴⁶ "Don't read much and don't put your confidence in what you read, but in the Spirit of our Lord who dwells in you, to whom you must unite and entirely abandon your soul" (LS 2.382; 1839, circular letter to Seminarians; ND 1.452). "Retain this principle well: you should not read spiritual authors in order to learn the theory of the interior life" (LS 2.588, Dec 1841, to M. Lannurien, Seminarian; ND 3.73). Blanchard confirms Libermann's thought when he says, "The position of Libermann in spiritual matters is firm: rejection of systems and fidelity to the interior experience of the Holy Spirit" (1.204). See LS 3.349, Jan 1844, to M. Clair, young Priest; ND 6.13.

⁴⁷ ND 11.546; Mar 1849, at a clergy meeting.

⁴⁸ LS 1.295-96, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary Director; ND 1.394. "Let us be as if we were nothingness, let us keep ourselves as nothingness before him, so that he can operate on this nothingness according to his incomparable good pleasure" (LS 1.449, Mar 1838, to Paul Carron, Seminarian; ND 1.503). "God wants to create his new spirit in you; he wants to make a new creature in you, and in the same fashion he created the universe, by his will and by his sole good pleasure" (LS 2. 290, Oct 1839, to M. Carof; ND 1.461). "Nothingness did not resist the Creator....there is not a single saint in heaven who did not resist him. Mary alone had this glory; also she is the marvel of marvels" (LS 3.205-06; Feb 1843, to Lossédet and Thévaux, future missionaries; ND 4.110).

It is impossible to appropriate to oneself the presence and sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit. He is always the Gift.⁴⁹ Libermann felt complete helplessness in the matter of holiness, which he wanted above all. This was highly intensified by his epilepsy. He coped with debilitating and humiliating fits by an unwavering confidence in the Holy Spirit rather than in useless muscular effort.⁵⁰ He lived his frequent exhortation: "Wait peacefully until it pleases our Lord to communicate with you; for this is not something that one takes, but something that one receives."⁵¹ Hence, it's simply a question of letting the Spirit be who he is, the Spirit of holiness. "...if he is your life that will be a life of holiness, since he has in himself all holiness and his life is holiness itself."⁵²

Libermann was sure that "great and beautiful things [that make] the angels rejoice and wonder" lay always within our reach. "The Holy Spirit incessantly knocks at the door of our heart."⁵³ The Spirit wishes to give us a "very beautiful and perfect life",⁵⁴ "this life so beautiful, so admirable, so delightful and so holy."⁵⁵ "Who can tell what our holiness might be if we listen interiorly to the divine Spirit and give him full liberty to establish in us his own life...."⁵⁶ The Holy Spirit makes the initial overtures, sustains the movement towards holiness, and he knows how it is to be done. "It is the Spirit who must work in our souls, more or less perfectly according to God's plans for us and according to our fidelity in corresponding."⁵⁷ He wrote five years earlier, in the same vein: "Jesus left you his Holy Spirit to direct you and lead you in this celestial way [Jesus as the Way]. It is this divine Spirit who turns your soul and directs it in this way. Be docile, for if you wish to go it alone, you will stray from this way. Only the Holy Spirit knows it and only he can make you walk in it."⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Catholic tradition has always insisted on the Holy Spirit as "Donum Dei" ("Gift of God"). This is richly developed by Pope John Paul in his encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986). The Nicene Creed enshrines this primal Christian belief: "We believe in the Holy Spirit the Lord and GIVER of Life."

⁵⁰ Gilbert, *ibid.*, p. 132, emphasizes the "passive" character of Libermannian spirituality and for support calls upon two sympathetic commentators of Libermann, viz., P. Blanchard and Père Liagre.

⁵¹ LS 2.490, Dec 1840, to E. Dupont, Seminarian; ND 2.176.

⁵² LS 1.302, Sept 1837, to Paul Carron, Seminarian; ND 1.484.

⁵³ LS 1.3, Sept 1828, to a Seminarian; ND 1.136.

⁵⁴ LS 1.296, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary Director; ND 1.394.

⁵⁵ LS 1.315, Oct 1837, to several Seminarians; ND 1.455.

⁵⁶ LS 2.407, 1839, to a Seminarian; ND 1.453: date 1837.

⁵⁷ ND 3.103; Jan 1842, to J. Schwindenhammer, deacon; LS 3.15.

⁵⁸ LS 1.367, Dec 1837, circulated letter to Seminarians; ND 1.447.

"It's a river of peace and love which flows into it [a soul given to total self-denial], and the Holy Spirit does such great and beautiful things there, that the angels rejoice over it admiringly."⁵⁹

"Let your sole desire, and a very ardent desire, be to live uniquely of his life [Holy Spirit] and to be entirely faithful to his voice, and you will be sure that he will work in you the greatest marvels of his grace."⁶⁰

PART TWO

LED BY THE SPIRIT

A DISCERNING THE ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Libermann teaches we are led by the Spirit toward holiness in accordance with our human nature. It is not an operation of the Spirit in which we have no part. Holiness like human maturation does not happen without our cooperation, without our sustained intention to be united with God in all we do and experience ("...divine grace, sown in the soul as a seed of life, does not develop without our fidelity and cooperation" ES 387). He manifests his energetic presence through our experience. There is no neon sign indicating that our experience is the result of the Spirit's action. We must exercise discernment to judge its origin, for we cannot know the Spirit's action except by the effects we see in ourselves (CJ 123).

The Spirit cannot be discerned unless the noise of agitation, restlessness, anxiety is muted. "Let your interior be in silence before him, the Spirit cannot be heard when we are in interior commotion"⁶¹ Consistently Libermann refers to the "voice" of the Holy Spirit that can be heard in the depths of the soul, which we recognize by the effects we experience (CJ 123). This "voice" discerned within our interior is "sweet" ("douce"), "adorable", "celestial", "divine", "lovable" (CJ 123). It is the Spirit who is instructing us. These "divine instructions" are "powerful and efficacious"⁶² and they especially reveal "the

⁵⁹ LS 1.126, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne, Seminarian; ND 1.230.

⁶⁰ LS 1.128-29, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne; ND 1.230.

⁶¹ LS 1.294, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, seminary Director; ND 1.394. "When one is thus moderate and very peaceful before God, one then acts more tranquilly and is more capable of hearing him and of following the movement he impresses in our interior" (LS 2.340, 1839, to a Seminary Director; ND 1.449). "...An essential point, in the spiritual life, is preserving peace of soul in order to hear our Lord" (CJ 343).

⁶² LS 1.447, Mar 1838, to several Seminarians; ND 1.455.

marvels the Father has endowed his Beloved Son to be also accomplished in us."⁶³ Hence, we always follow this "sweet and adorable voice with intense love."⁶⁴ Giving attention to the Spirit's voice assures us that "he will work in you the greatest marvels of his grace"⁶⁵ and a holiness that can hardly be imagined⁶⁶ and will give a sweet fragrance to the soul (CJ 123).

Libermann is not talking about "hearing voices" as we say of unstable people who say they do. He speaks metaphorically (see CJ 123). Hearing the voice of the Spirit is recognizing the Spirit as the source of desires, impulses, inclinations, affections, feelings, attractions, insights, zealous energy, impressions, enthusiasm, intentions, sentiments, dispositions, etc., which "tend towards God in all things and aim continually at union with our Lord in whom alone we find the life of our soul, which life is his Holy Spirit."⁶⁷

When we desire a spiritual good, we can tell its genuineness as coming from the Spirit when we experience a wanting that stands the passing of time, that is accompanied by a certain gladness, sweetness of soul, a sense of unworthiness to be so graced, ready to pay whatever price necessary, to even experience rejoicing in the midst of obstacles, contradictions, resistances, misunderstandings, feeling a certain contact with the divine world. We run towards the goal of our desires and wants, like Mary in haste to see Elizabeth (Ambrose talks in this context about haste following on the Spirit's impulse). We are preoccupied, the desire continuously on our minds, constantly warming our hearts, raising us above our pride and selfishness. Mary's first lines in her Magnificat capture the mood, rejoicing in God her Savior when great things were done to her. Something like Jesus' anxious desire to set the world on fire or his passionate anticipation to eat a last Passover with his disciples. There is released zealous energy, enthusiasm, excitement for the apostolate, joy in believing and loving, supported by hope and expectation of immediate fulfillment.

Libermann often returns in his letters to "rules of discernment", i.e., how do we know that what we want or would like to do is from the Holy Spirit or from our own wishful thinking. He stresses the role of the heart as the recipient of divine impressions and inclinations, whereas he cautions against the excitement of the mind and imagination.

⁶³ LS 2.407, 1839, to an anonymous Seminarian; ND 1.453.

⁶⁴ "This divine Spirit always manifests himself clearly when he wants to give a gift to his servants, and his voice is so sweet [douce] and so lovable that one always follows it with great love" (LS 1.104, Aug 1835, to M. Delasorne, a Seminarian; ND 1.206).

⁶⁵ LS 1.129, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne, Seminarian; ND 1.230. "May your spiritual eye be attentive to his adorable voice speaking in the depth of your soul. May your spiritual eye be modestly directed toward him in a spirit of continual prayer and may all the action of your will be to follow him with love, peace, docility and confidently" (LS 2.479, Sept 1840, to M. Clair; ND 2.209).

⁶⁶ LS 2.407-08, 1839 (?), to an anonymous seminarian; ND 1.453.

⁶⁷ LS 1.532, Jun 1838, circular letter to Seminarians.

"An attraction triggered by nature exalts the mind, agitates and preoccupies it, distracts from God, and inclines to self-love. God's attraction is peaceful, inclines less to the mind than to the heart, fortifies the will and makes it more faithful to God. The soul in this case is humble before God, joyous, happy, and desirous to be faithful to its vocation for which it prepares itself peacefully"⁶⁸

Discernment proves itself effective when we respond to these experiences without worry or haste, but in sweetness [*douceur*] and fidelity, conscious that the Spirit is leading us. For this discloses "the sweet [*douce*] action of the Holy Spirit to which the soul let's itself be sweetly [*doucement*] drawn."⁶⁹

Libermann believes that the Holy Spirit is prevented from doing "great things" in us because we indulge in "negative feelings", which keep us agitated, uneasy, ill-tempered. "If you let yourself be troubled, agitated and anxious, the Holy Spirit will not be able to act in you like he wishes...."⁷⁰ Resisting them brings on effort, vigilance, self-contemplation. These are not the supernatural. Libermann warns against thinking we can overcome them by muscular effort. He points out a better way that respects the primacy of the Spirit, that powerfully achieves holiness without our anxious effort and distracting vigilance. And this "better way" is Prayer, which he calls "Oraison". We expose ourselves to the Spirit, consciously, yes, but it is really the Spirit who leads us to this prayer-exposition of ourselves.⁷¹ "The union of our soul with God is the work of our Lord and not ours; it is the divine Spirit who should effect it in our souls more or less perfectly, according to the designs of God on us, and according to our fidelity in responding to it"⁷²

⁶⁸ LS 3.499, Aug 1845, to Marie Bouchet; ND 7.279. Some other examples of his advice: "...if you do not feel your heart strong and your mind decided to do the work, don't undertake it" (LS 2.248, Apr 1838; ND 1.393); "When God gives you a desire, it will always be with suavity. If he draws you to himself in all sweetness [*douceur*] and peace, allow yourself to be drawn... (LS 2.392, 1839, to a Seminarian; ND 1.453); "...if you experience in your interior a lively and sweet [*doux*] desire at the same time, humble and full of confidence, you can follow it gently, without pushing this desire by effort and violence beyond its limits..." (ND 2.199, Oct 1839, to M. Clair).

⁶⁹ LS 3.46; May 1842, to M. Casteilla, a Seminarian; ND 3.186.

⁷⁰ LS 1.171; May 1836, M. Mangot, future sub-deacon; ND 1.273.

⁷¹ Blanchard commenting on Libermann's passive-like spirituality says: "We are here at the very heart of the religious experience and spiritual doctrine of F. Libermann" (1.301).

⁷² ND 3.103, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer, Deacon.

B THE SPIRIT AND ORAISON [PRAYER]

For Libermann, the Spirit is on the verge of acting, waiting for us to rely on him to accomplish the holiness destined for all human beings. The Spirit starts his action in Baptism, clothing us in sanctifying grace that essentially connects us to the Trinity. But for this inchoate grace to blossom into conscious union with the Trinity, exposure to the Spirit is absolutely necessary. Libermann calls this intentional exposure "Oraison", which we translate as "Prayer".

Prayer ["Oraison"] as Libermann meant it is badly served by the translation "mental prayer". "...ordinarily one starts with meditation which is not strictly speaking "Oraison" [prayer] but a preparation for it..."⁷³ Mental prayer is thinking about something, it is meditating for the purpose of exciting the will (ES 115). "Oraison" [Prayer] suggests a **personal ambience**. We do not merely think of God, but we relate to him, we are aware of him, we look at him as it were face to face. It is a **direct** prayer, if you will, contrasted with meditation as an **indirect** prayer. It is being present to God, aware that he is present to us (which he always is whether we think of him or not, whether we intend to be in prayer with him or not). "Oraison" brings to bear the unitive virtues of faith, hope and love, called theological because they touch on God immediately (ES 8).

"Oraison" exercises these virtues like nothing else can. In this "theological" environment the Holy Spirit, the Giver of these virtues in Baptism, takes over because of our innate weakness and helplessness. It is he who prays in us, whose sole object is to make us adhere to Jesus in a faith excited with hope and energized with love. Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary, constantly looks at us in prayer with a love radiating sweetness [*douceur*], the revelation of which Libermann said would make us die of love and joy.⁷⁴

This loving sweetness [*douceur*], produced by the Spirit, compels us to profess like Samuel that we are ready to be at his beck and call, willing to participate in Christ's continuing mission of salvation. Praying thus in the Spirit we assimilate some of his holiness that triggers apostolic zeal, all because the Spirit has given us a taste for the love that Jesus has for us so that we understand better Paul's "*Caritas Christi urget nos!*" Increasingly, the one who prays such "Oraison" experiences the holiness of the Spirit seeping through soul and body so that increasingly the poor and the weak and the oppressed haunt one's prayer and life.

Of course, prayer cannot be a substitute for the apostolic life of service to the poor and the oppressed, nor can there be any apostolic excuse for neglecting prayer. Like Jesus, we desire in our prayer the realization of God's plan of salvation for all and we work at it with him. Jesus' prayer was rooted in his Trinitarian relationship, radiating out into the world for its salvation, implying all the time that in that prayer-relationship was the only power that could realize God's plan of salvation. Jesus knew he transmitted the power of

⁷³ ND 13.698, last conferences based on P. Lannurien's notes.

⁷⁴ LS 2.28; Jul 1838, to several Seminarians per M. Leray; ND 1.431.

God (=the Spirit: "If by the Spirit of God I cast out devils, then the kingdom of God is upon you" Mt 12:28) but it was a power which had to be to be prayed for and had to be received.⁷⁵

The Praying: The important thing is reaching what Libermann calls a "state of prayer", an awareness not of the topics of prayer but of God himself to whom we attend wholeheartedly. We know we don't need to go here or there or anywhere to engage in such communion with God. We need only look within.

"Descend deeply into your innermost self and never come out. If you do that, your joy will be full and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will flood your soul....For as long as you remain withdrawn into your heart of hearts you will always find the Holy Spirit there, who will lift you up and transport you to the top of that mountain of love which our Lord has built for his elect, and he will fill you with his graces, lights, beauty and happiness."⁷⁶

Libermann gives no justification for neglecting prayer. "There is definitely no relation with God without prayer [oraison]" (ES 212). It is precisely here that religious life demonstrates its truth. Pope John Paul II insisted on it: "No movement of religious life has any importance unless it is also movement inward to the "still center" of your existence, where Christ is."⁷⁷ Libermann too writes about the "still center": "May Jesus be everything in you, and may his Spirit be the unique life of your soul. Always go your way, or rather, let the divine guide lead you, who dwells in the center of your soul."⁷⁸

"Especially stick to Oraison. It costs somewhat to stay a considerable time in Oraison, preoccupied as you are by so many thoughts all day long. These thoughts come up during meditation, and when Oraison is about over one thinks the morning hour spent in prayer could be better employed in things more useful than these distractions. That's

⁷⁵ All the Gospels speak of Jesus praying often and exhorting to prayer. In particular Luke gives the most emphasis: 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28, 29; 11:1; 22:32, 41, 45, etc.

⁷⁶ LS 1.126, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne, a Seminarian; ND 1.230.

⁷⁷ John Paul II Speaks to Religious: 1978-1980, ed. Jean Beyer, S.J., no. 375. In recent years well-known Trappists (T. Keating, B. Pennington, both influenced by Thomas Merton) have been propagating the practice of what is called "Centering Prayer". The Centering Prayer absorbs input from Oriental mysticism, especially in the use of the body, and the rich Catholic tradition of mystical experience, as represented in books like The Cloud of Unknowing. It is based on the belief that the Holy Spirit is present in the soul and always operative there. Centering Prayer addresses that reality. "Our method really only opens the space for us to be able to learn from the Holy Spirit" (B. Pennington, America Feb 28, 1987). Pennington's schematic view of how this prayer can be done resembles Libermann's teaching on prayer.

⁷⁸ LS 1.386, Jan 1838, to M. Tisserant, a Seminarian; ND 1.495.

a big mistake. All the time spent struggling against these distractions is a time very pleasing to God and benefits us more than we think."⁷⁹

Prayer is where the Spirit forges in us a sweet and peaceful soul, our eyes fixed on Jesus in union with the Father. "...we must head straight to our very precious fountain, attaching ourselves and plunging in it suavely....since the Spirit of Jesus will so fill us, that he will overflow in us and will come out in rivers...."⁸⁰ "Lay open your inner being before our Lord so that you can sweetly [doucement] fix it on him, unite your heart to God; sometimes, keep it in repose, in his holy presence, looking at him thus with an eye of love, without effort, without forced attentiveness, but rather with sweetness [douceur] and suavity; sometimes, allow your soul to flow sweetly [doucement] into the bosom of Jesus our Lord."⁸¹ Libermann is talking the language of lovers, not the cool, objective language of the philosopher or businessman. It's reminiscent of childlike simplicity. He elaborates his conception of how prayer can be done:

"Prayer ["Oraison"] is...a very simple matter....It should consist in a repose which is simple, peaceful and full of confidence before our Lord; that is all. There is no need to look for many reflections or produce many acts of the will. Force nothing. Stand before Jesus like a needy and helpless child before his father, nothing more. Desire to be at his service. Be content with an interior glance towards him, from time to time, with that intention; the same thing in the course of the day⁸²: from time to time an effortless glance, aware of belonging to him and aware of our own inability, always with peace and in the calm desire to belong to him as you are. Look for nothing more."⁸³

Libermann knew that praying like this would surely permeate the "practical" living out of life, changing profoundly the one praying. "The more we are men of prayer [oraison], the more our soul with its faculties and senses is perfected in the natural order and in the supernatural order...." (ES 212). "Prayer [Oraison] reforms faults of character.

⁷⁹ LS 4.359, Dec 1846, to the Community at Dakar; ND 8.398.

⁸⁰ LS 1.350-51, Dec 1837, to Paul Carron, a Seminarian; ND 1.490.

⁸¹ LS 3.166, Dec 1842, to M. Guédant, a Seminarian; ND 3.351.

⁸² "One is not absorbed in God, but returns to him continually without any effort and as it were instinctively...so that one cannot help thinking frequently of God, as a friend frequently thinks of the one he loves" (ND 13.698; last spiritual conferences, April 1851).

⁸³ ND 7.37-38, Jan 1845, to M. Collin; LS 3.462-63. See LS 3.479.

If we want to know if we have made true progress in prayer [oraison], see if our faults perceptibly diminish. Natural faults cannot hold out against true Oraison." (ES 107). "Prayer [oraison] is one of the most powerful means and even perhaps unique for surmounting our bad inclinations because it puts us in rapport with God" (ES 216). Life lived this way keeps the one praying in constant contact with Jesus, in "practical union". The same things are done day after day in all their practicalness and nothing seems to change, except that in the praying person the Spirit finds room, opportunity and liberty to be the Spirit of Holiness who produces "the greatest marvels of his grace."⁸⁴

C ORAISON AND DOUCEUR

Prayer in awareness of God gives rise to inner calm, contentment and peace.⁸⁵ Libermann calls this array of attitudes "sweetness" (douceur), which also defines his notion how holiness comes into being. It is not a state of being that launches out into a self-activating holiness but a readiness to be impressed by the Holy Spirit. It is a condition of passiveness, receptivity that attracts to itself rather than reaching out to make or change this or that. It is like a magnet that attracts the Holy Spirit.

True to biblical teaching Libermann regards the Spirit as the one who breathes life into us in a noiseless, invisible and creative way. The Spirit is the creator of life, above all the creator of the life of Jesus in us into whose image he intends to make us. This life of Jesus is a total supernatural life, a life only possible through the Spirit, that gave purpose to the death and resurrection of Jesus ("...as yet the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified": John 7:39). It is a life, something that can grow. It surges up (John 4:13) to eternal fullness. It is not an automatic growth nor a blind surge, but effected by the Spirit acting within our total humanness. Libermann insists on the necessity of a favorable climate in which the Spirit can be powerfully active. Attitudes of anxiousness, grouchiness, surliness, sullenness, impetuousness, impatience, etc., disturb this climate and cause the Spirit to be "null and without occupation".⁸⁶

Commentators on Libermann's spirituality focus on this "climate" differently. Some see this climate in a peaceful soul, others in abandonment, others in self-denial—attitudes

⁸⁴ LS 1.129, Sept 1835, to M. Delasorne, a Seminarian; ND 1.230.

⁸⁵ In the New Testament writings "peace" is the most prized effect of believing in Christ and being laid hold of by the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity" (Gal 5:22-23). "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of justice, peace, and joy given by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). The Gospel writers remember very well that the first word of the risen Christ was SHALOM. Libermann knew these texts, understood them, and experienced Gospel peace—and so, frequently, he not only exhorted to peace but also tried to show the "logical" connection between peace of soul and holiness. "In order for God to act in us, it is extremely important to keep oneself in continual peace before him; it is even the unique means of arriving at the interior spirit" (ESS 47). "You know that I always preach the peace of our Lord; it's a thing so important that everything depends on it" (LS 1.175, May 1836, to M. Mangot, a future sub-deacon; ND 1.273).

⁸⁶ LS 1.294, Sept 1837, to M. Gamon, a seminary Director; ND 1.394.

that frequently enter into Libermann's exhortations. When they are thought to demand muscular effort, mental strain, they are not what Libermann had in mind. "Never strain with head or heart to maintain recollection or arouse good feelings towards our Lord."⁸⁷

Libermann often warns against "contention". In his last conferences of 1851⁸⁸ he defines "contention" as straining to be virtuous and prayerful by one's own natural efforts and in an aggressive manner. It consists in the physical application of physical organs or faculties in order to tend towards virtue, a disposition or some other supernatural object. It's an attitude that Libermann saw a lot of during his contact with seminarians. They lived in a "hothouse" atmosphere of silence and strict regulation (even of relaxation). They spent a good part of the day in mental application (prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, etc.). They saw the example of unusual holiness that Libermann radiated (which they couldn't help wanting for themselves, and the sooner the better). It is not surprising that not a few of Libermann's associates suffered incapacitating headaches, viz., Beauchef, Bureau, Roussel, Lannurien, Briot, Régnier. F.X. Libermann, his nephew, even F. Le Vavas seur who for four years was not able to read even a few lines in a book or pray a decade of the rosary.

Libermann was horrified by the violent "contention" these young men engaged in. He saw how futile this was. He sadly warned of the devastation "violating head and heart" did to one's health ("destroy the body"). Libermann saw "contention" for what it really was: "spiritual sensuality" (ESS 180), the cultivation of self-love (ND 4.229), even alienation from God (ibid.), when such natural efforts came to nought. For it was a denial of the supernatural character of HOLINESS; it wanted what it could see and feel, it was confident in human muscular power to produce the physical signs of holiness. This all fits in with his conviction that only the Holy Spirit can sanctify and create union with God.

Unsatisfactory Translations. Libermann's teaching on "Douceur" (=sweetness) is attracting attention. The Spiritan Papers reflect this interest. The theme of "Douceur" is becoming to be seen as the central element in Libermann's spiritual genius and missionary horizons. "Douceur" is insufficiently explained when translators insist on "meekness" and "gentleness" as proper equivalents.

James C. Okoje, C.S.Sp.,⁹⁰ writes that "English speakers will do well to remember that "doux" translates "meek..." "Meekness" evokes meanings like non-violent, non-resistant—negative attitudes. Whereas "sweetness" [douceur] conveys something positive like goodness, mildness, tenderness, affection, etc., all in the one word. In English a woman might call a man "sweet" which bears the best she could say about him, something positive, meaning tender, concerned, thoughtful, loving. She certainly wouldn't use "meek" in that context.

⁸⁷ LS 3.254, May 1843, to a novice Sister Paule.

⁸⁸ ND 13.704.

⁸⁹ ESS 8; LS 2.486, Dec 1840. to M. Dupont.

⁹⁰ Spiritan Papers, no. 20, p. 93. n.8.

Adrian van Kaam, C.S.Sp., acknowledges that the English equivalent he uses, viz., "gentleness", does not do justice to Libermann's conception ("...a term which, in its highly elastic applicability, defies translation"⁹¹). At times English speakers find the translation "sweetness" archaic, cloying, and even repulsive. Combination of words are sometimes used. For example, "loving gentleness", which avoids the saccharine connotation suggested by "sweetness" and retains the element of love missing from "gentleness" and "meekness".

Libermann's Definitions. The word "Douceur" and its cognates ("Doux" "Doucement") recur frequently in his writings. In two texts he leaves little room for limiting his understanding of the word to "gentleness" and "meekness". These texts are:

- (1) "Sweetness [Douceur]..., one of the most beautiful virtues that our Lord brought to earth, is not only practiced towards others, it first touches ourselves. It proceeds directly from our union with God, it is a ray of Jesus' love flowing into our souls to refine them by removing uncouthness and harshness of which they are full. This ray of love gives off a suavity which is felt in all our actions. Those who possess lovable sweetness [douceur] open themselves up before God with tenderness, and receive everything from his love with suavity, joys as well as sufferings; in peaceful humiliation of heart they patiently put up with their own troubles and imperfections; they maintain with their neighbor and with themselves such suavity and tenderness of heart that they win over everybody and diffuse God's blessing on all capable of it."⁹²

Comment:

In these traits of "Douceur" we have something more than gentleness and meekness. We are dealing with union with God, with Jesus' love for us. "Douceur" flows from that union and love. It is an integral element of loving union. Love does not exist without it.

- (2) "Preserve inwardly and outwardly the divine sweetness [douceur] of Jesus, which made him pour out suavity and celestial grace on whatever he touched. Everything in him was adorable and so sweet [doux] that there was no way of resisting him. Friends, if we were able to see the admirable treasures of Jesus' sweetness [douceur], we would die of joy and love. Be sweet [doux] like Jesus, but saintly sweet [doux] in your interior, by an effect of authentic love and by an authentic, suave and interior union with our very sweet [doux]

⁹¹ A Light to the Gentiles: the Life Story of the Venerable Francis Libermann (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), p. 275.

⁹² ESS 39.

Jesus. Why mimic this divine sweetness [douceur]? It is necessary to possess it in one's soul, with all the depth and the Spirit of holiness with which our Master possessed it. Be careful, friends, that it doesn't become your sweetness [douceur]. It isn't a question of your being sweet [doux], but that Jesus, living in you, lives there with his Spirit of sweetness [douceur] and suavity."⁹³

Comment:

Jesus in his Spirit is the source of our "sweetness". There is nothing like the sweetness of Jesus, its nature is divine, celestial, adorable, irresistible. It proceeds from the Spirit who unites us in love with Jesus and makes us experience within ourselves the "sweetness" of Jesus.⁹⁴

In our experience a "sweet" person is not just a gentle person, but is:

loving and tender, caring, warm, pleasant
accessible, pliable, mild
compassionate, kind, sympathetic, empathetic
devoid of harshness, bitterness, vengefulness.

A sweet person is an attractive person, easily liked. There's a beauty in such people that even an ugly body cannot conceal (Libermann said it was one of the most beautiful virtues Jesus brought us). Jesus is the original sweet person, it is his sweetness that makes us sweet and can create the climate for authentic growth in holiness by the Holy Spirit.

Biblical Justification. Libermann's teaching on "Douceur" depends on biblical imagery. He admired the self-consciousness of Jesus who described himself as "doux et humble de coeur", according to Libermann's French text, ("sweet and humble of heart"). Jesus "grew in grace before God and man" (Luke 2:52) that attracted attention and love. Jesus was easy to approach; children bouncing around on his lap implies more than a perceived gentleness and meekness. They see he likes them and they find him likeable. "Learn from our good Master to be sweet [doux] and humble of heart."⁹⁵ "...may he [the Spirit of Jesus] communicate to your heart the sweetness [douceur] and humility for which

⁹³ LS 2.28-29, Jul 1838, to several Seminarians per M. Leray; ND 1.431.

⁹⁴ From Rennes, 1838, Libermann wrote several letters to Mme Rémond in which he clearly associates "douceur" and love: "...consider Jesus acting in you with an incomprehensible sweetness [douceur] and suavity and desiring with great love to establish his reign there...." (LS 2. 163). "See him [Jesus] extending and establishing his sweet [doux] empire in your soul and organizing in you his reign of love, with suavity and ineffable sweetness [douceur]" (LS 2.171; ND 1.416).

⁹⁵ LS 4.667, May 1851, to M. Bourget; ND 13.151.

this divine Master gave us the example.”⁹⁶ He adds an important precision: “It isn’t necessary that you be sweet [doux] but that Jesus, living in you, live there with his Spirit of sweetness [douceur] and suavity.”⁹⁷

Such lovable attractiveness recurs in the image of the **Beloved Disciple** in John’s Gospel who rests on the breast of Jesus, an image Libermann frequently used. “Stay constantly at rest on the bosom of Jesus and abandoned into the hands of his divine Spirit. Be careful to keep your spirit in great sweetness [douceur] and great suppleness before him in all things.”⁹⁸ The Beloved Disciple represented the ideal disciple, and probably reminded him of other biblical images, e.g., the nursing infant:

“...fix your mind and heart sweetly [doucement] on Jesus alone, and let yourself go into his hands like a baby in the arms of its nursing mother. Do everything purely and simply before him, and live without care and without anxiety under the conduct and action of the divine Spirit.”⁹⁹

The Tradition of the Church has retained the meaning of “Douceur” as “Sweetness” in its devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It likes to refer to her as “Dulcis” “Dulcis Virgo Maria” “Dulcedo Nostra”. We wouldn’t be satisfied with translations that speak of gentleness. We mean much more, the much more expresses her loveliness, tenderness, responsiveness, her warm embrace. Being near her and thinking of her is a sweet experience, not merely a gentle encounter.

Experience of “Douceur” reveals our union with God: “It [“Douceur”] proceeds directly from our union with God” (ESS 39). It provides the necessary climate in which the Spirit, already active, can operate with full liberty and produce great things in us.

“If you establish yourself in God in complete peace, complete sweetness [douceur] and complete suavity, everything will be easily done; for the Spirit of our Lord acting in you in the midst of this peace, this sweetness [douceur], this calm and this interior docility of your heart will not fail to fashion you according to the good pleasure of this Father and beloved Lord Jesus”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ LS 4.658, May 1851, to M. Lairé; ND 13.144.

⁹⁷ LS 2.29, Jul 1838, to several Seminarians per Leray; ND 1.431.

⁹⁸ LS 2.425, Jun 1840, to an anonymous cleric, a close friend of Libermann; ND 2.129.

⁹⁹ LS 2.279, Aug 1839, to Carof, a Cleric; ND 1.460. See LS 3.47, May 1842, to M. Casteilla; ND 3.186-87.

¹⁰⁰ LS 1.379-80, 1837, circular letter to Seminarians; ND 1.447.

The "Douceur" that proceeds from union with God and is a ray of Jesus' love for us is beyond our control. It is pure gift, grace. It is something that the Spirit wraps us up in, clothes us with, soaks us in, to use common similes of Libermann. The "Douceur" of Jesus we hopefully expect and are assured that it will come, even if slowly, imperceptibly, suavely. We live and move in the lovable "Douceur" coming from being close to Jesus through prayer. We become meek and gentle and especially "sweet" with that sense of being loved that experiences fulfillment, contentment, expanding affection.

D DOUCEUR AND SELF-DENIAL

Through the sweet serenity of soul produced by the Holy Spirit in prayer we find ourselves wanting to repudiate anything that disturbs it (=self-denial). Self-denial finds its *raison d'être* in the experience of sweetness that "proceeds directly from our union with God" (ESS 39). It wants it to be protected, to be savored, so that union with God remain the one absolute good of Jesus' love which radiates a serene sweetness that the soul cannot resist or wants to.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer railed against charlatans promising "cheap grace". Libermann would have loved the expression because for him the road to holiness was arduous and no place for the fainthearted and unmanly.¹⁰¹ "True piety is that of our Lord and his Apostles: a manly and vigorous piety, which teaches us to give up the world and all it contains, to overcome ourselves in all things."¹⁰²

Libermann, for sure, affirmed the absolute necessity of self-denial:

"...give yourself wholly to interior self-denial, make it the base of your entire spiritual life."¹⁰³

"The true means of preparing yourself for a great gift of prayer is the most perfect self-denial....Once entirely empty of every creature and yourself, you will be disposed and ready to receive the Spirit of God with abundance" (ibid.).

¹⁰¹ "...this manly strength is faith and confidence in our Lord and in his Mother" (LS 3.382, Mar 1844, to Abbé Collin in Bourbon; ND 6.103). "It's shameful, friend, it is even something monstrous that a priest be effeminate and frail! The priesthood and softness cannot live together: one will kill the other. An effeminate priest becomes a paved road to hell" (LS 3.596, Jan 1848, to a young Seminarian; ND 10.7). "Let us be manly and vigorous soldiers in his service, forgetting ourselves and breathing only his glory and the salvation of souls" (ND 13.711; 1851, based on Libermann's last conference as reported by P. Lannurien).

¹⁰² LS 2.10; Jun 1838, to M. Leray, Deacon; ND 1.429.

¹⁰³ LS 2.355, 1839, circular letter to Seminarians; ND 1.453.

His idea of self-denial is expressed in shocking imagery and language:¹⁰⁴ "annihilate one's own faculties" "desire to be nothing and abject before God and man" "drag yourself continually in your lowliness and abjection before him" "beat yourself down" "crush the old man" "keep yourself in a state of lowliness and poverty and walk in humility of heart" "walk in the profoundest humiliation of your souls."

Libermann is a man of his time. Blanchard (1.428) ties Libermann's strong insistence on self-denial to his long exposure to the French School: "The principle [of self-denial] is the object of penetrating and prolonged reflection in the perspectives offered by the French School." Libermann thinks first of the biblical foundations for self-denial: "I'm not the one who preaches self-denial; it is Jesus Christ who has put this as the condition for becoming one of his 'disciples'" (ES 476).

His language discloses a Gospel urgency¹⁰⁵ and clarifies the memorable saying he uttered not long before he died: "God is all, man is nothing"—an expression totally biblical, profoundly exposing the spiritual thrust of the Bible. Libermann insists that the Spirit operates best when the human being has looked into himself and realizes he is poor, he is nothing by himself.¹⁰⁶ "...always abandon yourself to the divine Spirit of our Lord, with the dispositions of a poor man, full of awareness and experience of his own misery

¹⁰⁴ Michael Cahill, C.S.Sp., cautions that the literary expression of Libermann entails "the use of the language, concepts, images and categories of the system of spirituality that is known as the 'French School'." He shows how Libermann's commentary on John's Gospel needs to be "decoded" in this light. See Spiritian Papers, no. 20 (Dec. 1986), pp. 39-44. Felix Porsch, C.S.Sp., who has done brilliant work on the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel, in the same Spiritian Papers, concurs with Cahill's hermeneutical approach to Libermann's commentary on John's Gospel (p. 86).

¹⁰⁵ Jesus' lack of interest in family (Mk 3:31-35), politics (Mk 12:13-17), property rights (Lk 12:13-15), man-made beauty (Mk 13:1-2) underlines his passion for the "one thing necessary", namely, the will of his Father. He translates this into his teaching on human inability to serve two Masters (Lk 16:13). Libermann observed that too often people delay commitment indefinitely. They want to haggle with God, go only half-way, keep on calculating, take evasive measures. "...you will never be half for God and half for the world. You must decide once for all and take your side..." (LS 2.102, Oct 1838, to M. Levillain, a Seminarian; ND 1.425). "They always remain divided between God and creatures. They never are completely generous, they do not fly in the ways of God, but they plod along..." (ES 229). Gilbert, Le feu, p. 131, suggests that Lallemand is one source of Libermann's invitation to fully break with half-heartedness in the spiritual life. B. Kelly using Lallemand to interpret the apostolic changes(?) in Libermann in the early 1840s and onward recalls the emphasis on going all out, i.e., "taking the step" "crossing the threshold". It ought to be said that there was no lack of generosity or courage in him: all he needed was a providential sign to determine his apostolic direction.

¹⁰⁶ "Say calmly: My sweet [doux] Jesus, you know well that I am nothing, that I can do nothing, that I am worth nothing. Here I am as you find me, that is, a poor nobody. Take me, if you are good enough to show that mercy. I abandon myself and deliver myself into your hands and I ask for nothing more" (LS 2.392, 1837 (?), circular letter, to a Cleric; ND 1.453). Jean le Meste, C.S.Sp., in a brilliant article on Libermann's "Practical Union", summarizes Libermann's spirituality: "Simple in his spiritual life, simple in his direction, Father Libermann had only one aim: give his own people the haunting sense of their absolute poverty before a work taken up and provoke in them an unquenchable thirst for living water which resumes the entire prayer of the missionary" (Spiritus 6 [1965], no. 22, p. 31).

and the humiliating state of incapacity...."¹⁰⁷ And this is what Libermann meant by "walk in the profoundest humiliation of your soul." It's not a question of self humiliation but rather of experiencing our desperate need to rely on the Spirit. And this is really the core of his conception of how the Spirit fashions a person in holiness, like he marvelously did in the Virgin Mary: "He has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid...and has done great things to me" (Lk 1:48-49).¹⁰⁸

Holiness as the work of the **HOLY** Spirit should guide us in assessing Libermann's "dark side" of self-denial. He is not recommending muscular struggle, nor psychical stamina, nor a life as a watchman, nor a future without laughter. It is, rather, something like Thérèse of Lisieux experienced. When her sister marvelled that she must have suffered a great deal and given up a lot to have reached sanctity, Thérèse answered, No, it isn't that!¹⁰⁹ Thérèse is not denying the mortification and suffering she endured. She is saying that looking at them as the painful cause of her holiness misses the point. It was the Holy Spirit who made her holy and for Thérèse that was her joy.

Libermann is not proposing an active program of mortification which he calls "afflictive", i.e., we plan how to deny ourself, we choose what to forego, we impose on ourself what we have planned and chosen. Rather he inculcates a passive stance, a kind of negative mortification, which he calls "privative", i.e., we give up our own planning and choosing and accept what happens to us in everyday living, seeing in the present moment the hand of Providence: "...submitting ourselves wholeheartedly to all the pains and privations divine Providence sends us."¹¹⁰ "The most sanctifying crosses are those that

¹⁰⁷ LS 2.92, Aug 1838, to Paul Carron, a Seminarian; ND 1.511.

¹⁰⁸ The "great things" done in Mary by the Holy Spirit are often recalled by Libermann: "[She was] filled with the abundance of the Holy Spirit" "This plenitude of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Heart of Mary" (ND 12.133, Mar 1850, to J. Schwindenhammer; LS 4.598). "Filled abundantly by the Spirit, with the fullness of holiness and apostolate" "A perfect model of fidelity to all the holy inspirations of the divine Spirit" (ND 10.568, Règléments of 1849). "May the Holy Spirit superabound in you as he superabounded in Mary our dear Mother" (LS 1:495 Pentecost 1838, to F. Levavasseur, a Seminarian; ND 1.474). Libermann liked to talk about the "treasure" that Mary is to his fellow members of the Congregation: "a vast treasure" (CJ 94) "a true treasure" "a great treasure" (CJ 94), "our treasure" (LS 3.39, Apr 1842, to Maurice Bouchet, a Seminarian; ND 3.178). Pope John Paul speaks of the greatest work of the Spirit in the history of creation and salvation being the conception and birth of Jesus Christ which resulted in the "grace of union" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, p. 50).

¹⁰⁹ Both Blanchard and Liagre see Libermann as anticipating a kind of gospel freedom taught by Thérèse. Blanchard says: "One has claimed that saint Thérèse had effected, in the history of spirituality and in the domain of mortification, a real revolution, in substituting for an asceticism of grandeur that emphasized crucifying performances an asceticism of littleness that preferred interior mortifications. From 1835 to 1850, in France, the Venerable P. Libermann had begun this revolution in his direction of innumerable people who entrusted themselves to him" (1.436). Liagre wrote an important essay on the spiritualities of Thérèse and Libermann, singling out the profound similarities between them.

¹¹⁰ LS 3.523, Feb 1846, to Abbé Jules Dat; ND 8.64-65.

come to us independent of our willing them."¹¹¹ Does it need to be said that some "afflictive mortification" is in order, even necessary? The Church has always sensed this. It seems hard to believe that "privative mortification" can do without it. Some "afflictive mortification" emanating from a calm interior attraction without anxiousness and tenseness helps prime the pump, as it were, for better discernment of the Spirit's call to "privative mortification". Moreover, such "afflictive mortification" can be expressive of a deep sense of Jesus' love and sacrifice for us, filling the need to respond to his love and sacrifice.¹¹²

SELF-DENIAL AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

For Libermann, privative self-denial protects and nurtures sweetness [douceur]. It accepts the privations occurring in daily life, which he calls "providential".¹¹³ His missionaries will have enough suffering without looking for it¹¹⁴ in bodily self-affliction. "It is providential privations that must be grasped with joy...which come to us according to the ordinary course of his divine Providence and by the action of people."¹¹⁵

What does Libermann understand about divine Providence? He presupposes God is actively engaged in bringing everything that is happening into such a harmonious interplay that his purposes for creating and redeeming are surely achieved. Divine Providence is running things sweetly and effectively. We have no control over this "sweet and effective" action of Providence, but are players in the game, consciously or unconsciously, because our decisions and actions are taken up into this divine plan. For our own good, we can be a contributor and enjoy a glimpse of how nicely things turn out in the long run. This means waiting for the right time to do something or recognizing the right time in what is happening around us. We can act knowingly in the divine arrangement by discerning and accepting God's right time, his moment.

¹¹¹ LS 3.620, May 1848, to Sister Aurélie; ND 10.188.

¹¹² However, in some cases Libermann could allow for exterior mortifications, for a short time, in moderation, corresponding to a supernatural attraction (LS 2.135, Dec 1838, to M. de Goy; ND 1.438; LS 3.29-30, Feb 1842, to M. Lannurien; ND 3.128; LS 4.633, Aug 1850, to Mgr. Bessieux). Libermann expressed this twofold distinction variously, all coming down to the same thing: afflictive/privative (LS 3.521-54, Feb 1846, to J. Dat; ND 8.62), positive/negative (LS 3.29-30, Feb 1842, to M. Lannurien; ND 3.128), exterior/interior (ND 3.44, Oct 1841, to M. Lannurien; LS 2.564). He saw dangers in afflictive/positive/exterior mortification as self-love, vanity, wanting to feel like one is doing something for God's glory (ND 13.681, Aug 1850 Conference). This kind of mortification would consist in fasting, long prayers, discipline, wearing hair shirts, anything that would inflict pain on the body (ND 13.72, Mar 1851, to M. Collin) and block the emergence of a sweet disposition essential to the Spirit working in us.

¹¹³ ND 3.44, Oct 1841, to M. Lannurien; LS 2.564.

¹¹⁴ ND 6.337, Sept 1844, to M. Lannurien.

¹¹⁵ LS 2.564, Oct 1841, to M. Lannurien; ND 3.44.

From his earliest years in the seminary Libermann spoke of divine Providence as his only support. "I have neither resource nor asylum...I will go into the street and Providence will lead me where it wishes."¹¹⁶ His attitude was contagious. "He strongly drew us to prompt and absolute abandonment into the hands of Providence....His example pushed us even more than his words."¹¹⁷

Libermann waited confidently for signs and action from Providence. He was willing to wait all his life. "If I have to wait until I die, I will wait, provided the divine will is accomplished in its fullness."¹¹⁸ He painted an unforgettable image of how he acted and wanted others to act: "It seems to me that anyone...who counts on his own forces can be stopped before an obstacle; but when one counts on our adorable Master alone, what difficulty need be feared? We stop only when there is a wall in front of us, waiting patiently and confidently until there is an opening, then we pass through as if nothing had happened."¹¹⁹

Libermann described himself as a sentinel before God,¹²⁰ on the alert for some sign of his will. He observed events contributing to the success of his work, often, he says, despite him. He was conscious that his plans never turned out the way he expected, that divine Providence brought about results that exceeded his hopes. "Up to now we have kept ourselves in the way of divine Providence, it alone has conducted us. I have never been able to execute a plan I thought of. It was as if by magic that I carried out all that came to us by Providence, of course not without crosses and suffering."¹²¹

Relying on Providence wasn't something he remembered occasionally, but something he embedded into his working consciousness: "This is a rule that I have prescribed for myself in dealing with public affairs: to wait all the time for the moments of Providence."¹²² "...my rule of conduct...always prefers to wait for opportunities that divine

¹¹⁶ ND 1.157, from P. Coyer, Eudiste.

¹¹⁷ ND 1.310, from Father Perrée during Beatification process; Libermann refers to the "ardent zeal of M. Perrée" in Compléments, p. 91, Jul 1847.

¹¹⁸ ND 4.7-8, Nov 1839, to Father Faillon, seminary Director. He recommended such life long longanimity to M. Telles, seminary Director, LS 2.262, May 1839 and to M. Clair, LS 3.626, Aug 1848; ND 10.293.

¹¹⁹ LS 2.476, Aug 1840, to E. Dupont, a Seminarian; ND 2.171. Dupont cited in Dec 1852 a similar text of Libermann: "God does not want his works to be attributed to human beings; he wants them to be recognized as his own. When obstacles arise we must always keep on doing what we can, remaining at the foot of the wall, waiting until it falls, and then passing over it" (ND 2.160).

¹²⁰ "I am like a night watchman before God, I stay up, attentive to his will" (ND 6.171, Apr 1844, to M. Bouchet; LS 3.397). He is talking about vocations to his Congregation.

¹²¹ LS 4.602, Pentecost 1850, to F. Le Vasseur; ND 12.199.

¹²² ND 6.45, Feb 1844, to Abbé Desgenettes; LS 3.371.

Providence seems to arrange for the success of our missions."¹²³ His confidant Frederick Le Vasseur had vivid memories of his mode of conduct:

"...our dear Father took great pains to wait for the moment of God when he had some good work to do. He was not slow to act when it was necessary, but he knew how to wait a long time for indications of the will of God and his moments; this dependence on the conduct of God, this fidelity to observe his moments, he carried them over to the least circumstance."¹²⁴

Waiting for the right time—God's moment—appears frequently in Libermann's recommendations regarding apostolic work. He had an incredible knack for discerning God's moment. He knew how to wait for things to mature before making decisions and taking action. He excelled in discerning this "moment" when dealing with his missionaries in Africa, despite having to wait months, sometimes many months, for events to gel and personnel to measure up to his expectations. He was convinced that God has "a time" for everything. He urged patience in waiting for it. "Never be in a hurry, wait for God's movements; if they delay in coming stay in peace before him; don't anxiously desire that these movements come in accordance with your ideas and desires. God is able and wishes to wait; why can't you do the same and why can't you want it that way?."¹²⁵

Libermann taught that nothing good comes fast. He had his own "theology" of how God causes good things to happen. They come slowly, butt up against obstacles and meet resistance, but in time deepen their roots and grow into something difficult to uproot and bring down.¹²⁶ That "moment" will come he urges, but in God's time, not according to

¹²³ ND 6.59, Feb 1844, to Mère Javouhey; LS 3.372.

¹²⁴ ND 1.339-31.

¹²⁵ LS 3.18, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer, Deacon; ND 3.104-05). "If one wants to go too fast, one precedes the action of divine Providence and by preceding it does not succeed" (LS 4.75, Feb 1844, to an unknown Priest). "Don't hurry too much; divine Providence will free you from all your troubles sooner or later" (ND 6.236, Jun 1844, to Mère Javouhey). "Don't hurry too much in doing good. Patience is of the highest importance in apostolic works; if one hurries, one necessarily becomes discouraged because one always meets up with big obstacles" (LS 4.139, Sept 1844, to P. Lossadat; ND 6.340). "Generally it isn't necessary to be in a hurry. We know that we can do nothing; let us count on God alone and let's not hurry, let us wait for the movement of his divine Providence" (LS 4.182, Dec 1844, to Ign. Schwindenhammer; see ND 6.489). "God goes slowly in his works, let us be careful not to walk faster than him" (ND 12.166, Apr 1850, to Mgr. Kobès).

¹²⁶ "Know well that the works agreeable to God are only established gradually, in the midst of difficulties. The Church itself was not formed except in this manner" (LS 3.53, May 1842, to J. Schwindenhammer; ND 3.189). "The works of God are done gradually....That's ordinarily the conduct of God towards people" (ND 3.311, Oct 1842, to the Superior General of Castres Sisters). "It has always been the order of Providence to manifest its maternal care in the midst of obstacles, and the best results have normally been produced after the greatest difficulties" (ND 8.92, Apr 1846, to a Belgian Canon). "After great trials he

human calculation and expectation, as if it is something God owes us, but in surprising ways and when we least expect it. "Divine Providence will come to our aid from sources we least expect" (concerning vocations).¹²⁷ "Wait for these moments [of God] with peace; they will perhaps come sooner than you think."¹²⁸ He would allow hastening God's moments "by the intensity of our desires and prayers."¹²⁹

The word "moment" appears for the first time in his Rennes' correspondence (1837-39) when apparent lack of success, feelings of uselessness, reemerging epileptic seizures, and, perhaps unexplainable to him, absence of God, ravaged his physical and emotional being.¹³⁰ He had nothing to rely on except God who would act in his time. This could explain why, from now on, "waiting for God's moment" occurs increasingly in his letters until the end of his life. From the numerous references (over 40, not counting equivalents like "movements of God") we offer a selection, chronologically arranged, and representing the last 12 years of his life:

"Wait for the moment of God and don't try to anticipate it....the big secret is being patient and waiting for the moment of God."¹³¹

"...contemplative love makes Mary [Martha's sister] wait for the moments of God with sweetness [douceur] and tranquillity: Maria domi sedebat."¹³²

"Wait patiently and lovingly for the moment when God will deem it opportune to manifest his good pleasure."¹³³

ordinarily gives great graces" (ND 13.359, Nov 1851, to Sr. Sainte Agnès).

¹²⁷ ND 9.115, Apr 1847, to M. Germainville.

¹²⁸ LS 3.176, Jan 1843, to M. Clair; ND 4.75.

¹²⁹ ND 9.118, Apr 1847, to Mme Arragon.

¹³⁰ Authors consider the Rennes experience (Jul 1837-Dec 1839) to be pivotal in his spiritual development. They all seem to agree that his excruciating desolation and sense of personal uselessness and failure echoed the classic experience of "the dark night of the soul" so impressively described by John of the Cross. See, e.g., B. Kelly, *ibid.*, who interprets Libermann's Rennes' experience as the classical dark night of the soul which turned Libermann into a fervent missionary to the Black Peoples of the world.

¹³¹ LS 2.199, Feb 1839, to M. Richard; ND 1.456.

¹³² Commentary on John's Gospel, p. 638.

¹³³ LS 2.582, Dec 1841; ND 3.69 (concerning M. Lannurien going into Black work).

"Be led by divine Providence and wait peacefully for its moments. Who knows if they are very far away?"¹³⁴

"The moment of God has not yet arrived....I preferred to wait for this moment rather than precede it."¹³⁵

"Be patient and wait for the moment of God; it will come, friend, be sure of it, and perhaps it is not so far away."¹³⁶

"...it seems to me that the moment of divine Providence has not yet arrived for us to go there [Madagascar]."¹³⁷

"You don't know what God has destined for you; abandon yourself to Providence; while waiting do the good you have begun and wait for the moment of God."¹³⁸

"Wait for the moment of God and pray while waiting."¹³⁹

"Wait for the moment of God...it belongs to God to determine that [which work to choose] by his divine Providence."¹⁴⁰

"...waiting with patience, sweetness [douceur] and moderation the moments of God in order to be victims of his holy will."¹⁴¹

"...henceforth be assured that we are firmly resolved to send you people, when we can; wait for the moment of God to arrive."¹⁴²

This sampling of texts reflects persistent concern to get in step with divine Providence. He wanted to discover God's "right time"—his moment—in affairs affecting

¹³⁴ LS 4.23, Jan 1842, to M. Tisserant; ND 3.112.

¹³⁵ LS 3.176, Jan 1843, to M. Clair; ND 4.76.

¹³⁶ LS 3.430, Sept 1844, to M. Lossadat in Haiti; ND 6.409.

¹³⁷ ND 7.129-30, Apr 1845, to F. Le Vasseur.

¹³⁸ ND 8.36, Jan 1846, to F. Le Vasseur (concerning what missions to pursue or leave go in the Indian Ocean).

¹³⁹ ND 9.283, Oct 1847, to F. Le Vasseur (concerning young members not ready to be foundation members like him and Libermann).

¹⁴⁰ ND 10.3, Jan 1848, to M. Cahier.

¹⁴¹ ND 13.225, Jul 1851, to Mgr. Kobès.

¹⁴² ND 13.728, Oct 1851, to M. Gravière.

the Congregation and the individuals who came to him for spiritual direction. He believed in divine Providence orchestrating everything smoothly, without hitches, in a measured manner, and inexorably.¹⁴³ Providence was, though incomprehensible and mysterious,¹⁴⁴ "adorable".¹⁴⁵ For it all came to the one thing, namely, the revelation and realization of the divine will. He saw in the birth and growth of his missionary Congregation evidence of what God wanted, and when and how he wanted. "You see that I don't do what I want. Divine Providence conducts our affairs despite me, for I assure you that if I had followed my ideas I would have been very hesitant to undertake so much at the same time."¹⁴⁶ "I have put my confidence in God, and his divine Providence has decided what I would not dare undertake."¹⁴⁷

Libermann admired the way divine management of human affairs was stated in Wisdom 8:1, a text he often referred to: "*Attingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter*" (the translation he used read: "La Sagesse atteint avec force d'un bout à l'autre, et dispose tout avec douceur"). He saw this passage as biblical justification for his exhortations to nurture sweetness [douceur] interiorly and exteriorly, so that the Spirit can operate more easily within the person and that apostolic action proceed effectively in imitation of Jesus.¹⁴⁸ "...if we are deeply united to this divine Spirit, he will enable us to penetrate even the depths of God, when that should be useful for the salvation of souls."¹⁴⁹

Thus the "sweet soul", exposing itself to the Holy Spirit in prayer and renouncing its self-determination, tries to live in harmony with divine Providence, waiting to identify with its inexplicable variations, confident that things, whatever they are, would work out in personal holiness and apostolic fruitfulness mutually integrated. The effort, pain,

¹⁴³ He shunned any action that could resist the inexorable outcome of God's Providence. "Our affairs have gone at such a pace that I do not know what to make of it and I would think it a crime to resist what's happening" (ND 6.322, Jul 1844, to M. Collin). "When God has decided, all our efforts to oppose him are vain" (LS 3.454, 1844, to Sr. Aurélie; ND 6.464).

¹⁴⁴ He felt dumbfounded over the to and fro of divine Providence (e.g., in the shifting events in Haiti's political scene which prevented Tisserant from finally getting there to work) which he judged to be incomprehensible (ND 7.170, May 1845, to M. Gamon). Later he would say to his niece Marie Libermann, "We can't comprehend the mysteries of Providence and its conduct in our regard" (ND 12.243, Jun 1850,).

¹⁴⁵ In his very early letter to his brother Samson and Wife when his possibilities for earning a livelihood were precarious he could write about "the adorable secrets of divine Providence" (LS 1.13, Jul 1830).

¹⁴⁶ LS 4.92, May 1844, to an anonymous Priest.

¹⁴⁷ ND 6.192, May 1844, to M. Gamon.

¹⁴⁸ For the usage of Wisdom 8:1 see *Commentary on John's Gospel*, 1840, p. 624; LS 3.17, Jan 1842, to Ign. Schwindenhammer (ND 3.104); LS 3.73, Jul 1842, to L. Levavasseur (ND 3.226); LS 3.180, Jan 1843 (Dec 1843 ?), to Louise des Loges (Sr. Aurélie); ND 11.317, Dec 1849, to M. Fridoli.

¹⁴⁹ LS 2.312, Dec 1839, to Father Feret, a seminary Director; ND 1.673.

deprivation this involves changes the missionary profoundly, whether he perceives it or not. He is not discouraged by lack of success or emotional satisfaction in his prayer or absence of human comfort. He is living as we say today "eschatologically", that is, living as if eternity were his constant companion, his supreme concern, and his strongest strength. And the Spirit best operates in the one who lives such a demanding life in a sweet gentleness, a loving gentleness, generated by the conviction that Jesus has loved him and died for him and is present in him.

F PRACTICAL UNION: THE GOAL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ACTIONS

According to Libermann the Spirit of God is a HOLY Spirit, who starts the process of holiness in Baptism and intends that it be finished. The human being, when aware in faith that the Spirit is present within him, responds in the only "logical" way possible: he lets the Spirit in a climate of sweetness lead him into a holiness of living for God and for others, holiness and zeal being integrated, each in the other, each unable to do without the other. This integration Libermann calls Practical Union.

Practical Union, embodying the traditional elements of the spiritual life, offers a NEW WAY OF LOOKING at the holiness for which his missionaries willingly undertook difficult and dangerous works. He would be badly misconstrued if it were thought that he had a "new secret" for achieving holiness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There is nothing in his explanations of Practical Union that cannot be found in his earlier writings.¹⁵⁰ He doesn't give the impression that he has discovered something new. As far as we know,¹⁵¹ he first used the expression in 1851 the year before his death (Feb. 2, 1852). It seems to have been forged out of awareness of his missionaries' experiences in

¹⁵⁰ In 1829 (ND 1.134-35) he urged M. Viot to the "holy practice" of doing nothing without raising the mind to Jesus and asking for help which is the same as living in God's presence; in 1836 (LS 1.163-64) he explained to M. Mangot that continual prayer consists in the unique desire of pleasing God in everything; in 1845 (ND 7.213) he tried to encourage M. Perée to be attached to Jesus in everything, to be united to him in action; in 1848 (LS 4.518) he wrote to P. Laval in Mauritius of the necessity to surrender himself in his actions to Jesus; in 1847 (LS 4.547) he counselled J. Schwindenhammer to have a sincere intention (a key word in Libermann's elaboration of his thought on Practical Union) to be for God. Such elements of Libermann's spiritual thought can also be found in the materials he prepared for discussion in the "Bands of Piety" at Issy and St. Sulpice (ESS 1-57).

¹⁵¹ The expression doesn't appear in his letters. It is only found in his Instructions to Missionaries (ES 480-96, 1851) and in the notes of Father Lannurien taken at Libermann's conferences (ND 13.697-702). Hence, it is used in situations where Libermann can give it special attention. Father Jean Le Meste, C.S.Sp., in Spiritus 6 (1965), pp. 29-43, "Libermann et 'Union Pratique'," thinks that the formula "Practical Union" was too loaded with meaning to be treated informally in a letter. He says, "Perhaps this new expression, which served to bring together his thought on a crucial point, appeared to Libermann too complex and too rich to be grasped on the fly, when he had no leisure to explain it. For the expression contains, it seems, the last stage of a doctrine which needed a concise and significant formula" (p. 34).

equatorial Africa where they labored in enervating climates,¹⁵² crude living conditions and exhausting apostolic endeavors.

Prayer proved to be difficult and unattractive. Yet they knew as Libermann taught them that without prayer there was not much chance of growing in holiness which, in turn, was taught them as absolutely necessary if they were going to be effective missionaries.¹⁵³ Libermann urged them to persevere in prayer despite the lack of feeling or consciousness of union. "Tell our beloved brothers not to be at all discouraged if they feel no sensible piety, if they experience a certain lassitude due to the heat and difficulty in praying well. They are not children any more: so they have to be vigorous in walking in God's ways without bodily enjoyment. They must seek God for God himself and in God."¹⁵⁴ He pointed out the apostolic necessity "...to sacrifice oneself for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, without habitually experiencing palpable interior satisfactions."¹⁵⁵

Libermann studied the nature of prayer all his life (people who knew him said "he had an answer for every difficulty in prayer").¹⁵⁶ He learned that many people desired a life of solitude and contemplative prayer which he himself longed for. "...my most ardent and constant desires carry me towards retreat and solitude....there isn't a fiber in my body and a movement in my soul which don't push me towards solitude."¹⁵⁷ But, for Libermann, it was not the superior form of prayer and life, because that was not the way Jesus lived. He didn't remain in the mountains to pray or in less populated places to get away from the people but exposed himself to the public at large. He worked for his Father, and he

¹⁵² "Hot weather disheartens and enervates" (ND 6.221, 1844, to F. Pierre). Missionaries suffered because of the rigors of hot Africa. Libermann calls the climate "unhealthy" and a "murderous influence", and which can wreak havoc on prayer-life, community relations and apostolic zeal because of the stifling heat's effect on the nervous system which can bring about chronic agitation and irritability. Recollection for prayer and gentleness towards others become almost impossible. See ND 13.148, May 1851 to M. Duret; LS 4.663: "...your dear Africa easily excites the impressionable part of the soul, and disposes it for a certain irritableness." "I think it is most important they [missionaries] guard against agitation and irritation produced by the climate [of Africa]" (LS 4.683, Nov 1851, to Mgr. Kobès; ND 13.351).

¹⁵³ "African people have no need of and will not be converted by skillful and capable missionaries; the sanctity and sacrifice of the Fathers are to save them. Be holy as Jesus was holy. It's the only means of redeeming and sanctifying souls." (ND 13.143; May 1851, to M. Lairé; LS 4.658). "If they are holy religious they will save souls, if they are not they will do no good, because God's blessing is attached to their holiness..." (ND 13.355, Nov 1851, to Bishop Kobès; LS 4.682).

¹⁵⁴ LS 4.59-60, April 1842, to Fr. Le Vavas seur; ND 4.198.

¹⁵⁵ ND 13.699 [conference].

¹⁵⁶ ND 1.311, Father Perrée.

¹⁵⁷ LS 4.275-76, Jan 1846, to Fr. Le Vavas seur; ND 8.30. Libermann had a taste of solitude when in Rome (ND 2.493, 1841, to M. Cahier; LS 2.549) during 1840. His own inclinations ("How I love solitude and retreat!" ND 3.29, Oct 1841, to M. Halé, layman) gave him a profound respect for the Carthusians (ND 12.97).

did nothing other than that. "I always do what is pleasing to him" (John 8:29) denotes active ministry and connotes unbroken union with God his Father. His life was the complete blending of prayer and action.

"There is nothing so beautiful, so noble on earth as the apostolate; the contemplative life is very inferior to it: it represents only a part of the life our Lord. The apostolic life represents in itself the perfection of the life of our Lord on which it is modelled. More than any other life, it gives us conformity to Jesus Christ."¹⁵⁸

The example of Jesus ("...they will continually fix their eyes on him as their leader and their model...they will trace their life from his...."¹⁵⁹) should convince them that the integration of prayer and ministry through Practical Union was possible and necessary.

"The apostolic life is that life of love and holiness the Son of God led on earth in order to save and sanctify people, and by which he continually sacrificed himself for the glory of God and the salvation of the world."¹⁶⁰

Libermann knows that his missionaries will have more than enough work. There will be little time to let up for a while and take stock or pick up pieces. They will not easily find the satisfaction of being successful, nor of enjoying what they are doing for God. The climate and work will see to that. They will not "feel" holy. "The apostolic man has given himself entirely to God without even seeking to enjoy God, but uniquely devoted to his service he sacrifices the enjoyment of God in order to serve this same God."¹⁶¹ But the process of holiness is going on, in profound ways, with startling effectiveness, because they have entrusted themselves to God. "The soul is directed towards God and that renders its actions holy" (ES.96). The attestation of one of his former Novices at Rennes (M. Mangot) shows how Libermann realized this teaching in his own life:

"One day I made this observation to him [Libermann]: It seems to me that your very busy life opposes habitual union with God. He answered: On the contrary, as each new duty rises, I appeal to God

¹⁵⁸ Glose de la Règle provisoire; manuscrit inédit, p. 4.

¹⁵⁹ ND 10.505, Règlement 1849.

¹⁶⁰ ND 10.505, Règlement of 1849.

¹⁶¹ ND 13.710. From the reports of a Novice (judged authentic by Father Delaplace who completed them ND 13.686) on Libermann's last conference given to Novices in the Spring of 1851.

for his assistance, and then it happens that the more I have to do the more my union with God is strengthened."¹⁶²

Libermann sees his missionaries as men of action (often he calls Practical Union "active union"). He expects them to be busy people, engrossed in apostolic tasks (preaching, establishment of churches, liberating from ignorance, poverty, oppression), actively engaged in public with those who need them most. In his time they were the Black People now being given freedom from slavery and left on their own. He saw that they needed to hear the Gospel and to be lifted up from their sub-human life. Their condition moved him to profound compassionate suffering. "My heart bleeds and I feel torn apart when I think of the horrible condition of these abandoned people."¹⁶³ Coming to their aid was a task that could overwhelm anybody's best zeal.

The experience of his missionaries compelled him to think in terms of Practical Union. He has not forgotten their spiritual needs in his anguish over the misery of the Black People. He can complain of how little time or no time he has to take care of his own spiritual welfare.¹⁶⁴ That doesn't lessen his concern for their well-being. "I rejoice intensely when I think about our dear confrères; and I think about them often."¹⁶⁵ For them he expounds his thought on Practical Union, a doctrine of little speculative content but one that speaks to the missionary life. That teaching, in his mind, belongs naturally in a missionary world. It is a teaching that rises up out of "this world", the apostolic fields, and not, as it were, "from above", deduced from prior spiritual convictions.

Libermann calls this union "practical" because it relates to everything a human being experiences, "the ordinary habits of life" (ES 496). In these daily experiences he talks of "directing ourselves towards God" (ES 96), "tending towards God" (ES 491), "being inclined towards God" (ES 447), "being attached to God" (ES 448). Practical Union is initiated and developed in tending towards God, intending God as the purpose of our actions.

He describes Practical Union in various ways, all reminiscent of biblical teaching and experience. He never thought that he was saying anything different. In fact he wouldn't think of formulating a spiritual thought without its justification in Scripture.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² ND 1.521.

¹⁶³ ND 7.90, Mar 1845, to Mère Javouhey.

¹⁶⁴ ND 7.401-02, Nov 1845, to M. Collin.

¹⁶⁵ LS 4.59, Apr 1842, to Fr. Le Vasseur; ND 4.198.

¹⁶⁶ He could see similarity between his spiritual ideas and those of the Scriptures. He knows what has been the practice of the biblical saints. Adam, Henoch and Abraham "walked before God." Micah (6:8) counselled: "... what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk [humbly] with your God?" Jesus taught that God blesses those who do his word like Mary who, completely trustful of God, was ready for the word to be done in her life. The essence of this biblical experience can be summed up in memorable Pauline statements: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to

"In prayer as in practical union for the ordinary habits of life, the soul is united to God by faith and love."¹⁶⁷

"It is a question of living and acting practically under the influence of and dependence on Jesus Christ who lives [in us]."¹⁶⁸

"...practical union consists in curbing nature and allowing oneself to be impressed by grace...banishing all natural impressions, in order to seek to please God alone."¹⁶⁹

"To attain a habitual tendency or union [=practical] with God it is necessary to be zealous in adhering practically to all that pleases him."¹⁷⁰

"...the soul inspired by grace is united to God in the acts and ordinary habits of life by faith, hope and love....In that is the foundation of the union of the soul and the essence of its holiness...."¹⁷¹

Practical Union is exercising faith, hope and love in "the ordinary habits of living". It is living for God, aware of his presence, acting out of faith and love, and entrusting one's whole being and future to God. It is what Paul means when he says "that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15). This Pauline text, among others, shows how traditional Libermann's teaching is and easy at hand, that is, "practical".

Practical Union touches on everything we do and experience, "the acts and ordinary habits of life". Okoye says it "describes...a total relationship, a spirituality".¹⁷² Gilbert comments, "in order to describe the way of Practical Union the entire spirituality of Libermann needs to be resumed."¹⁷³ H. Koren goes simply to its essential nature: "In such

the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" Romans 14:8. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" Colossians 3:17.

¹⁶⁷ ES 496.

¹⁶⁸ ND 13.684.

¹⁶⁹ ND 13.700.

¹⁷⁰ ES 486.

¹⁷¹ ND 13.410.

¹⁷² Op. cit., p. 91 n.8.

¹⁷³ Op. cit., p. 182.

a union [practical] the soul is faithful to God's grace in all the big and little circumstances of everyday life and sees everything in its relationship to God and God alone."¹⁷⁴

These Authors stress the all-embracing nature of Libermann's conception of Practical Union, which he also calls "active union", "habitual union", both synonyms stressing the pervasiveness of this union throughout human life. It is a union that comes to terms with a busy apostolic life and finds in that apostolic life the expression of its relationship with Christ that is rooted and developed in prayer, initiated and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

The interplay of prayer and apostolic activity becomes a fertile field for the Holy Spirit. "Give him [Holy Spirit] freedom [to act in you] and you will see the great things he will work in you."¹⁷⁵ It is this same Spirit, Libermann says, who is "the author and consummator of all holiness and inspirer of the apostolic spirit."¹⁷⁶ Holiness and apostolic spirit blend into Practical Union because the Holy Spirit is the finisher of holiness and the instigator of apostolic zeal.

Mary who was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit lived to perfection "in the ordinary habits of living" the faith, hope and love that brings to fruition Practical Union. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) reveals that she could rejoice in God her Savior in ecstatic prayer and at the same time be concerned about the hungry, the oppressed and the weak and conscious of her people Israel from whom comes salvation as her Son is said to have emphasized (John 4:22). She is called blessed because in her decisions she always says "Be it done to me according to thy word" and that is what her Son remembered best about her: "Blessed rather is she [they] who hears the word of God and keeps it." That is why the Spiritans Rule of Life asserts that "We live out our mission in willing obedience to the Holy Spirit, taking Mary as our Model," as Father Libermann did.

CONCLUSION

Practical Union is the summit of the grace life given by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. It shows that that life was meant to affect human life in all its ordinary habits and acts. Noteworthy in Libermann's teaching about Practical Union is the apostolic emphasis this expression is meant to evoke. Tending towards God must reach out to all human beings; pleasing God in every way includes all human beings, particularly those who are in misery and abandoned. The Spirit is a power and energy, but a "sweet" Spirit who accomplishes his purposes in Practical Union in a smooth, solid way. The Baptism Spirit is an "apostolic Spirit" bent on comforting poor human beings through the vibrant apostolic effort of those deep into Practical Union. It is the sweet and gentle Jesus the missionary works for and in sweet union with him provides the space and freedom for the Holy Spirit to accomplish the salvific economy of the Father.

¹⁷⁴ The Spiritans: a History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, 1958), p. 158.

¹⁷⁵ LS 1.122, Sept 1836, to his brother Samson and wife; ND 1.168.

¹⁷⁶ ND 10.568, Règlement 1849.